The Battle of Brandywine

ON AUGUST 24, 1777, in the third year of the American Revolution, General William Howe with 13,000 British and 5,000 Hessian troops landed near Head of Elk, Maryland, his goal being to seize Philadelphia. (MAP 1) By September 9, his army was at Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, six miles west of the Chadd's Ford Crossing of Brandywine Creek. Facing him from the east side of Chadd's Ford, about five miles downstream from the point where the creek divides into east and west branches, was George Washington with 11,000 American soldiers.

Although dry weather had left the Brandywine shallow, it provided a considerable obstacle. Trees grew thickly to the banks, making it impassable to an army except at the fords. There were, however, no fewer than three of these between Chadd's Ford and the forks of the Brandywine, and another (Pyle's) just below Chadd's. Immediately above the forks, the east branch of the creek was crossed by Buffington's Ford and, a mile and a half farther up, by Jefferis' Ford. Across the west branch, less than a mile from the forks, was Trimble's Ford.

The region was inhabited chiefly by Quakers, whose religious views made them neutral. Most local families who favored the American cause had fled. Thus, Washington got sparse information, and much of that was inaccurate—he was told, for example, that there was no ford above Buffington's for twelve miles. Furthermore, the rolling and forested nature of the ground prevented good observation.

Washington deployed General Anthony Wayne's brigade and Colonel Thomas Proctor's artillery on high ground east of Chadd's Ford, covering the crossing. General William Maxwell's brigade was moved across the creek to form an outpost line on a hill, blocking the Kennett Square-Chadd's Ford road. General John Armstrong and about a thousand Pennsylvania militiamen were posted to cover Pyle's

Ford. General John Sullivan's division extended northward along the Brandywine's banks. Farther upstream was General Adam Stephen's division, and beyond that was General Lord Stirling's division. Detachments under Colonel Moses Hazen were at each of the upstream fords, up to and including Buffington's. The brigades of Generals Peter Muhlenberg and George Weedon, comprising General Nathanael Greene's division, were in reserve behind Wayne. With them was most of the light horse, under the Polish volunteer, Count Casimir Pulaski. Other light horsemen were sent to scout west of the Brandywine to report any British movements.

Perhaps with Tory help (Joseph Galloway, a prominent Philadelphia loyalist familiar with the region, was with the British), Howe had better information than Washington. Instead of a head-on attack against prepared defenses, he planned a wide flanking movement. One part of his army would advance on Chadd's Ford in a demonstration to preoccupy Washington; the rest, screened by hills and woods, would march north, cross the creek's west branch at Trimble's Ford, cut northeast to Jefferis' Ford,
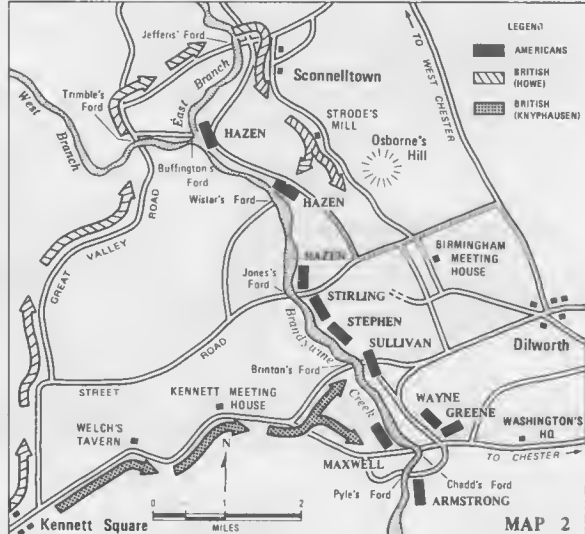
MAP 1

MAP 2
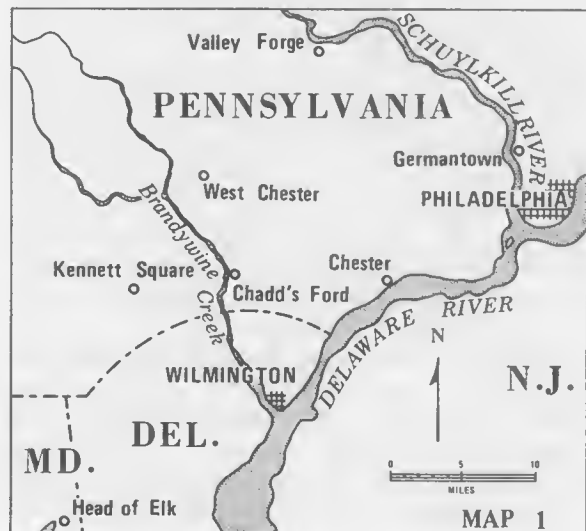
then turn southward to drive down on the Americans.

As if to favor Howe's maneuver, heavy fog blanketed the area when the flanking column began its march early on the morning of September 11. Howe took the lead, heading a force of 13,000 British and Hessian troops.

Having a much shorter distance to go, the other force—under the senior Hessian officer, General Wilhelm Knyphausen—did not move until 9 A.M. Within a few minutes its advance guard surprised a detachment of American light horsemen who were refreshing themselves in the taproom of Welch's Tavern. After one volley, the Americans abandoned their mounts and fled to cover in the woods. About a mile beyond, the British ran into stiffer opposition from Maxwell's advance line, sheltered behind the graveyard walls of Kennett Meeting House. This slowed Knyphausen's movement but did not halt it, and Maxwell's main outpost line was soon breached. By shortly after ten o'clock, Knyphausen had deployed on the high ground opposite Wayne's position and was digging in. While his artillery began a desultory bombardment and Proctor's cannon replied, Knyphausen marched other detachments back and forth between the hills. The Americans watching from the other side of the creek, seeing what appeared to be column after column of redcoats, became convinced that Howe's entire array was facing them.

Meanwhile, Howe's column did not go completely unobserved. At some time after 10 A.M. reports reached Sullivan from American light horse under Colonel Theodorick Bland, scouting west of the Brandywine, and from Lieutenant Colonel James Ross that they had seen what appeared to be two British brigades moving up the Great Valley Road toward Trimble's Ford. When this word reached Washington, he decided that Howe had divided the British army. With the enemy exposed to defeat in detail, Washington ordered Greene to strike across the creek. Greene's leading elements quickly waded the Brandywine and drove off the enemy troops entrenching the crests above the ford.

While this was going on, another messenger arrived from Sullivan. A local militia officer, Major Spear, had ridden from the forks of the Brandywine to Welch's Tavern, seeing no sign of British troops. Washington now concluded that Greene's division was attacking the entire British army. Hurriedly, he ordered Greene back to his original position. Washington was so sure that Spear's information was correct that when Sullivan's aide, Major John Eustace, rode up to report that he too had seen British forces on the Great Valley Road, Washington laughed at him.

In the meantime, Howe's column had moved past Trimble's Ford. Near Jefferis' Ford, Howe and his staff halted long enough to drink the quantities of wine which some Wilmington merchants had stored at Ammon Jefferis' house, having thought it would be safe there from British raiders. Before resuming the march, Howe pressed Jefferis into service as a guide. By about 2 P.M., the force had passed the hamlet of Sconnelltown and was near Osborne's Hill, where there was a halt for the troops to rest— the day had grown exceptionally warm—and eat while scouting parties reconnoitered to the south. (MAP 2)

About 1:15, Colonel Bland, now back on the east side of the Brandywine, had seen what he estimated to be two British brigades just west of Strode's Mill, but it was around 2 P.M. before this information reached Sullivan and he could start it on to Washington. Shortly afterward, Squire Thomas Cheyney, a prominent local figure who was a strong patriot, arrived to tell Sullivan that he had barely escaped capture by the British and that there were many more than two brigades of them. Sullivan thought that Cheyney's estimate was exaggerated, but did give him a pass to take his story to Washington.

When Cheyney was finally admitted to the Commander-in-Chief, the General at first was skeptical. Once persuaded, however, he wasted no time, and orders sped to Stirling, Stephen, and Sullivan to move immediately to the high

ground where the Birmingham Meeting House stood athwart the British approach route, about a thousand yards south of Street Road. Sullivan, as the senior of the three, was to exercise overall command.

Stirling and Stephen reached the Meeting House a little before 4 P.M., Stirling's division deploying on the left of the building and its surrounding stone wall, and Stephen's on the right, the outer ends of both lines curving southward to follow the contours of the hill. Five cannon were posted at the center. Skirmishers formed a line in an orchard at the·intersection of the Sconneltown-Dilworth and Street roads.

The British force had split at Strode's Mill. One column swung to its right across the fields to get around the left flank of the Americans at Birmingham Meeting House. The rest continued down the Sconnelltown-Dilworth road. Just north of Street Road they deployed, their ranks extending well beyond the American right flank.

Sullivan had farther to go than Stirling and Stephen. Before he could reach them he heard firing as Hessian advance elements drove the American skirmishers out of the orchard. Then Sullivan's leading regiment caught sight of British troops to their front, considerably closer than Sullivan to Stirling's position. Hastily, Sullivan directed Colonel John Stone to attack with his regiment, to try to gain time for the rest of the division to close the gap on Stirling's left flank. (MAP 3)

Stone and his men raced toward the British, who halted and opened fire. Seeing this, Sullivan's rear brigade delivered a volley. This fire did not reach the enemy but plowed into Stone's hapless troops from the rear, and they broke and fled. As Stone wrote later, "I can scarcely blame them when I consider their situation."

The rest of Sullivan's division pushed on and deployed, still some distance to Stirling's left. Sullivan himself rode over to confer with Stirling and Stephen. The generals could see the scarlet ranks, stretching well around to the right, threatening to outflank Stephen's position. All three agreed that Sullivan should shift his division to reinforce the right wing. Riding back, Sullivan gave the necessary orders, but as his men moved out they were hit by a British attack and most of them fled. Although the American artillery began a sharp bombardment to hold off the British, Sullivan was unable to reassemble


MAP 3
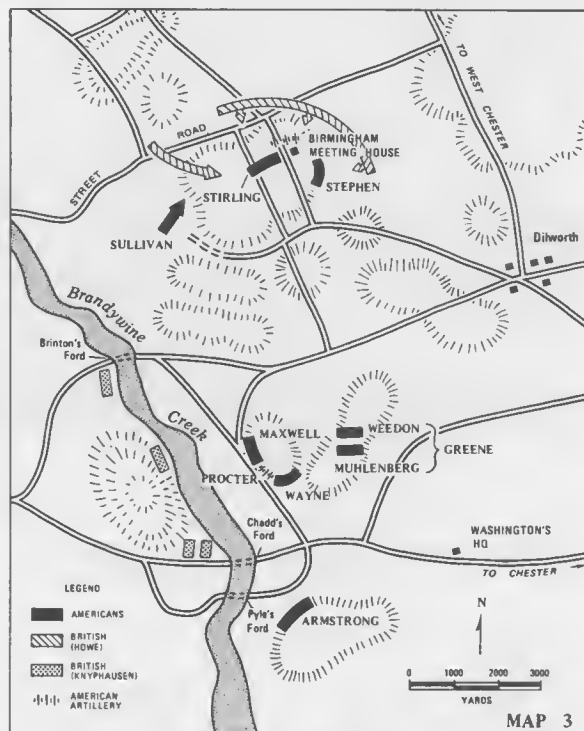
his men, and he galloped back to the Meeting House.

The British pressed their attack. The Americans laid down a telling fire, slowing the British advance, but being steadily forced backward on the flanks. After almost an hour, the British were close enough to launch a bayonet charge against the American right flank, held by a brigade under a French volunteer, General Prud'Homme de Borre. As the scarlet line drove in, De Borre panicked and fled, followed by his brigade (later, he resigned rather than face a court of inquiry). Under increasing pressure, the Americans on the left also gave way, but the center held on.

In the meantime, the sound of the battle had carried to Chadd's Ford. Washington immediately ordered Greene out of reserve to reinforce the troops at Birmingham Meeting House, and Greene's men, Weedon's brigade in the lead, were soon pelting across the fields. Then, as the gunfire swelled, Washington turned over command at Chadd's Ford to Anthony Wayne. Guided by a local farmer, Joseph Brown, the General and his aides started for the battle in a cross-country gallop reminiscent of Washington's fox-hunting years in Virginia.

While Greene and Washington were on the way, the threat of imminent encirclement forced the Americans to abandon Birmingham Meeting House. With most of the artillery horses dead, the cannon had to be left behind. The troops fell back half a mile along the Dilworth

MAP 4

MAP 5
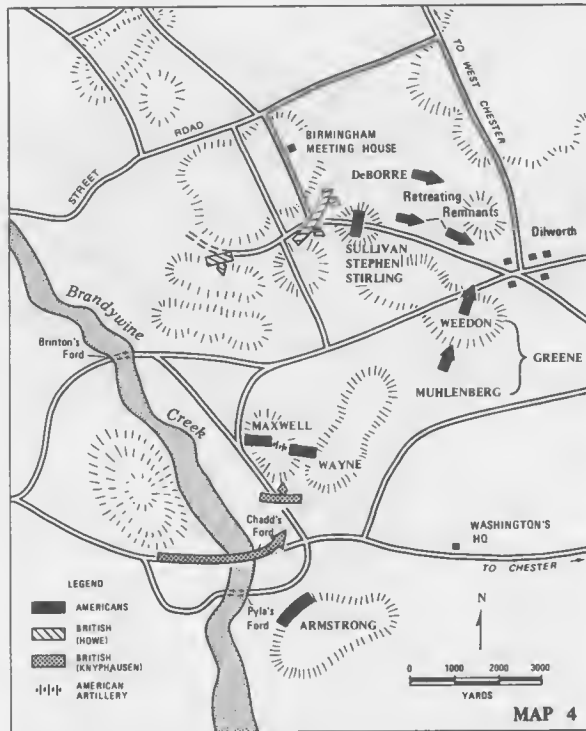
road to a hill, where they formed another line. There the British struck them again, but were hurled back—not once, but five successive times. However, the Americans' ammunition ran low, and few were armed with bayonets; at the next British charge the surviving Americans began streaming down the hill.

At this point Washington reached the scene and, with his staff, tried to rally the men, disregarding the hail of British bullets. But all efforts proved fruitless.

Meanwhile, Weedon's men arrived—they had double-timed four miles in about forty minutes—and deployed at a narrow defile on the Dilworth road a little to the rear. They parted ranks to let the retreating troops pass through, then closed up again, halting the pursuing British with volley after volley.

While all this was going on, Knyphausen had been busy at Chadd's Ford. Despite heavy fire from Proctor's cannon and the infantry of Wayne and Maxwell, he pushed across the creek, overrunning the artillery and driving the infantry out of the trenches. (MAP 4) Wayne fell back into a nearby field and orchard, where fighting was hand-to-hand until the Americans retreated to another hill just to the south. For a time there was a breathing spell while Knyphausen started moving his artillery across Chadd's Ford. Then Wayne saw more British troops coming down
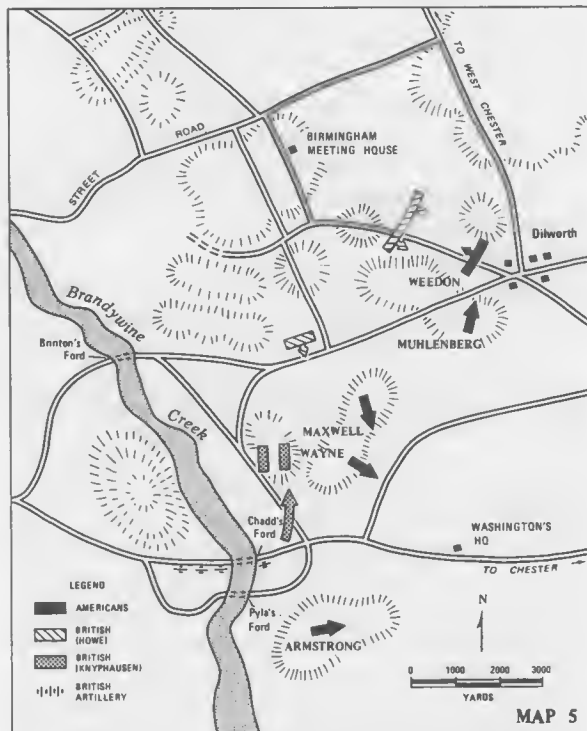
from the north, and a messenger arrived with word of the defeat of Sullivan's force. Hopelessly outnumbered, Wayne withdrew toward Chester. At Pyle's Ford, General Armstrong (whose militia had not been engaged) also ordered a retreat.

But on the north, Weedon's troops were successfully buying time for the rest of the army to escape. Their fighting withdrawal slowed the British pursuit, and darkness brought it to a standstill. (MAP 5) Howe did send cavalry to try to cut the road to Chester, but the British troopers were beaten off by American light horse led by Pulaski. By midnight, considerable numbers of Americans had reached the comparative safety of Chester, and the rest trickled in through the remainder of the night.

While Howe had defeated the American army, the unexpectedly bitter resistance he met had kept him from his goal of crushing it. Nor had American morale been crushed. As Washington's report to Congress stated, "Notwithstanding the misfortune of the day, I am happy to find the troops in good spirits; and I hope another time we shall compensate for the losses now sustained." Although the British occupation of Philadelphia, another American defeat, at Germantown, and a bitter winter at Valley Forge would intervene, Washington's hope would eventually be realized.